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July 2016

William Blake's mastery of print media long presented a problem for readers of Blake who wished to experience the full range of his illuminated books. While The William Blake Archive offered a solution to access to the various copies, the formats for reading digital media have been too intrusive for conventional literary pedagogic experiences. As such, this paper explores the potential for a new generation of devices for opening up Blake's works in a variety of ways and how that potential is itself affected by ecosystems and economic decisions that prevent easy, open access.

Blake's Books and Digital Ecosystems

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1. In 2013, at a meal with a poet and senior colleagues, the conversation at our table inevitably turned to books that we were reading. Admitting at some point that wherever possible I preferred to use a Kindle, I was met with a mixture of confusion and even mild horror, while for my part I felt considerable amusement at playing the role of devil's advocate. I certainly do not read every book on such a device: many (particularly older ones still in copyright) are not available as e-books; for art books, I prefer a glossy hardback with high-quality paper and a resolution that even the latest 4K and Retina screens struggle to match; finally, I conceded that sometimes I was as interested in typography and layout (where a lot of e-books still falter) as I was in ideas and content. Yet, despite these various exceptions, it remains the case that the majority of books I read are electronic and that, where possible, I prefer to travel with most of my library in one device weighing a few ounces. I still remember visiting Rome on a holiday when I had to write an undergraduate dissertation: as my holdall passed through an airport X-ray machine, all that could be seen was a dense, black mass, and I spent the next half hour worrying that I was about to miss my flight while watching a security officer as he retrieved book after book from my bag. Against such undoubted convenience, however, my dinner guests fretted that something essential was being lost in the transition to electronic formats, and they were particularly surprised that someone who has spent so much of his career studying particular *books* could be so eager to abandon the citadel in favor of a platform better suited (as they saw it) for *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011).

2. In many respects, it would be easy to bracket off this particular discussion as taking place among a group of people of a certain age, ones who did not grow up as digital natives. While I do not consider that to be true (just from witnessing reading habits on different types of public transport where people of all ages increasingly read from electronic devices), we do seem to be approaching a period where the status of the printed book is converging with various other media such as DVDs and CDs, ripe for digital dissemination. Personally, I have a suspicion that the future role of print will be closer to that of vinyl: much loved by cognoscenti—who will laud its

superior qualities—but not an object for mass consumption. As such, we have arrived at a crucial stage in the use of William Blake in the classroom, where mobile electronic devices will soon be ubiquitous. In the same year of my dinner discussion with the poet and colleagues, I taught classes where more students would turn up with some form of tablet or e-reader than a printed copy of the texts set for that week's discussion. As an early adopter, previously I would sometimes elicit polite curiosity from those students as I sat in front of them with a Kindle or tablet: now it elicits no response whatsoever. As such, this essay is particularly concerned with an issue of digital pedagogy that is especially pertinent to Blake studies: what is it that students are actually reading and what role will e-books have in education in contrast to traditional print formats? While I believe that the electronic formats currently available are inadequate for Blake's work, this inadequacy is based upon the fact that Blake is a special case that print has not served well. The issue of e-books is a surprisingly recent one for digital pedagogy, for reasons that have more to do with economics and distribution than the actual technology. In the illuminating 2007 collection, *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age*, for example, e-books are barely mentioned in contrast to e-portfolios and online delivery aimed at desktop and notebook computer users. Similarly, in Brett D. Hirsch's edited volume *Digital Humanities Pedagogy* (2012), the main focus remains on the use of computer mediated technologies that bring with them considerable benefits for the processing of data to present it in innovative ways, such as Matthew K. Gold's wonderful account of the project "Looking for Whitman." But the actual experience of reading remains relatively unexplored, perhaps because that experience has been rendered apparently transparent by our close encounters with print. One of the great virtues of teaching and studying Blake is that the fundamental question of what it is we are reading, even how we actually read the pages before us, cannot be taken for granted.

3. What is important here is not to create or invert hierarchies of print and other media, but to return to the objects of reading and transmission as part of a material culture that is not simply a crude materialism or technological determinism but instead part of an ecology (in Timothy Morton's sense of the term): the "practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, mineral" (7). Such an ecology emphasizes, after Graham Harman (2011), Levi Bryant (2011), and Manuel De Landa (2009), a flat ontology of objects as the means to understand better that practice and process. This is especially important with Blake: most Blake readers do not have access to his original artifacts and have instead constantly engaged with products of different media and publishing ecosystems. I have written extensively with Roger Whitson about how Blake has been created as a virtual object in an archive and ecosystem created by publishing companies and academic scholars since the late-nineteenth century, and that this virtual Blake is a "plane of consistency" that makes possible the organization of particular works—for example the recognition that Blake wrote a body of work that we call the "prophetic books" (Whitson and Whittaker 33). What I am more concerned with in this essay, however, is the role of those digital ecosystems in which Blake—like so many authors and artists—will become increasingly entangled. In so many respects, Blake is an exemplar of print culture at its height, and he certainly understood the processes of printing much more than the vast majority of writers, but we must also accept that for the vast majority of future readers Blake will be digital.

4. It is almost impossible to think that one of the most technologically-astute writers, artists, and self-publishers of his (or, indeed, any age) would have been anything other than profoundly concerned with the means of producing, disseminating, and consuming digital versions of his own works had he been alive and working today. In addition, although Blake, especially in his later life, demonstrated considerable hostility towards capitalism, he was deeply concerned with the *business* of literature and art—whether in his own projects such as printmaking or the illuminated books, or as engaged with publishing opportunities for editions of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797) or Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808) (Bentley 69-81). With regard to the digital ecosystems in which his work will increasingly be encountered, however, it is important to take a critical and more properly ecological view than the oft-abused phrase "digital ecosystem" frequently allows. Theories of media ecologies have their roots in the work of Marshall McLuhan and Gregory Bateson among others, with important developments by theorists such as De Landa and Jussi Parikka (2012). Although there is a tendency to slip into media and technological determinism among a number of these writers or to emphasize the divisions

between orality and literacy in ways that cannot always be justified, nonetheless such theorists contribute significantly to understanding the practices and processes by which we may gain awareness of our connection to other objects. This is very much in contrast to the notions of digital ecosystems as bandied around by monopolies such as the Big Four (Apple, Google, Amazon, and Facebook, the latter often interchangeable with, or supplemented by, Microsoft), who are attempting to gain control of our relations with media in a very deterministic fashion. As Michael deAgonia has written (somewhat melodramatically) the contest between tech behemoths is “a war between vast ecosystems made up of hardware, software and online services,” one in which the ecosystem is very clearly tied to economic imperatives above anything else and in which the aim of such a comprehensive market and operational system is intended to obscure users to the consequences of their buying decisions. For those interested, deAgonia’s article is an extremely good summary of how the big technology groups are seeking to exercise monopoly over media consumption, but as with so much current technology writing on the subject, the reduction of important agents in these ecosystems to the role of consumers offers more blindness than insight.

5. Blake’s own system of production was, as practice, a trenchant critique of the system of publishing in his time, whereby late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century booksellers hardened the barriers between producers and consumers. Morris Eaves has discussed extensively how the Public Address (1810), issued as an advertisement for the engraving of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims, explored the processes of a “rational division of production” that adapted programs of pedagogy and principles to an ideal of a macrosystem capable of unifying all aspects of book production in a system of ideologies (i.e., taste), institutions, technologies, and economics (176). As Blake remarks in the Address:

Englishmen rouse yourselves from the fatal Slumber into which Booksellers & Trading Dealers have thrown you Under the artfully propagated pretence that a Translation of a Copy of any kind can be as honourable to a Nation as an Original . . . Be-lying the English Character in that well known Saying Englishmen Improve what others Invent[.] This Even Hogarths Works Prove a detestable Falshood. No Man Can Improve An Original Invention. (Erdman 576) ^[1]

As Eaves observes, the division of labor into a system whereby journeyman were no more than hired hands employed by publishers to reproduce (and, in Blake’s opinion, botch) designs originating elsewhere was reflected in class terms as the “separation of ruling upper-class minds from working lower-class bodies” (172). William Hogarth lived at that cusp when art was becoming increasingly commercialized, with print forms being displayed as engravings in shop windows frequented by the bourgeoisie rather than paintings restricted to the homes of the aristocracy. Hogarth himself took advantage of this transition in the market to engrave his own works, but by the nineteenth century, the publishing ecosystem had firmly divided the arts of invention and execution. G. E. Bentley, Jr.’s recent exploration of Blake’s activities in the “desolate market” demonstrates the various ways in which Blake sought to prosper (or merely survive) in this fragmentary system that reduced him to the role of a journeyman, as teacher, printer, shop owner, and publisher of works in conventional typography. However, it was through his illuminated books that Blake most actively set himself up in opposition to the interlocking framework of production that sought to bring consumers and publishers together for the highest profit while relegating the engraver to the role of hired hand. As Bentley observes, Blake originally sought to distribute his works conventionally through retailers (most notably Joseph Johnson), writing in 1793 that “the Author is sure of his reward” (as cited by Bentley, 103); by 1818, however, Blake printed his works to order and made the melancholy observation that they were “unprofitable enough to me tho Expensive to the Buyer” (as cited by Bentley, 104). Ultimately, Bentley points out, the works in illuminated printing “provided only a small fraction of his income” (104), and it was only the munificence of patrons such as John Linnell and Thomas Butts, who saved Blake from penury in his later years, as his annual income fell from a high point of some £203 per annum in the 1790s to a low of £68 in the 1810s.

6. Part of the reason for Blake’s commercial failure during his own lifetime, as well documented by Bentley, Eaves, Viscomi, and others, is that his technological innovation was not sufficient to overcome the economic transformations that took place during his lifetime, dividing the roles of book production and promotion into various streams. Such commercial failure,

however, should not detract from the aesthetic triumphs of Blake's endeavor, which, as Eaves observed, was to employ the technology of the book in what was ultimately a pedagogical service: to teach the English public (and also the English school of painters) the importance of original creation as opposed to imitation, a mission that identifies the divine with the human and as such aims at a total transformation of human psychology, religion, and society (Eaves 133-134). Blake, who most famously declared that he must create a system or be enslaved by another man's, saw the role of art as far beyond the limits of print and the booksellers of his day (for which, as he laments in the Public Address, his contemporaries considered him mad). The publishing ecosystem of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries had sacrificed what, for Blake, was its most important aspect—the illumination and transformation of both reader and author—for the sake of retail efficiencies and smoother production cycles. Stephen Behrendt (3-4) compares the experience of reading Blake to engaging with Tristram Shandy (1759-1767): our expectations of what to find in the text and our simple assumptions of what a text should be are overturned in a highly interactive process of reading. The reader is forced to take on a greater responsibility for formulating meaning, and as such he or she must reassess their own ideas of how such meaning can be created as part of a dialectic with Blake's books and as part of the process of illumination. In *Pedagogy of Freedom* (2001), Paulo Freire rails against the reduction of education to "a question of training a student to be dexterous or competent" (22), arguing instead for the right for education to dream of utopia. Blake's own practice, then, was not to instruct his readers into the narrow bounds of correct competence, a variant of what he would have seen as moral law via the brass books of Urizen, but rather to lead them to their own discovery of utopia via an eternal conversation:

. . . I give you the end of a golden string,
False Religious Only wind it into a ball:

[...] It will lead you in at Heavens gate,

[...] Built in Jerusalems wall. (Erdman 231)

As technology, the printed book is subject to a whole nexus of production, distribution, and economic cycles that we easily recognize with other media formats but that have been all too eager to mystify when it comes to the printed word—almost certainly because of its early associations with the Word of Gutenberg's first bestseller. Leaving aside the complex issue of Blake's originals, which are largely inaccessible for the vast majority of instances of teaching, there is no longer a privileged position for *print* when studying his work. The printed book has long demonstrated itself fallible when connecting with an audience in the way that Blake so desperately desired. This is reflected in the transition in Blake studies in the two decades since Joseph Viscomi's *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993): from discussing Blake's *texts* to considering *copies* of his work. As such, in terms of using Blake in the classroom, we should not assume some hierarchy of being when handling Blakean artifacts: if anything, the production methods of commercial printing demand a complete disruption of Blakean unity of design and execution if the publisher has any hope of financial success. Blake studies have long been at the forefront of using digital technologies to disseminate an artist's vision—the [Blake Archive](#) being one of the pre-eminent resources in the digital humanities, offering as it does the most complete corpus of Blake's works that would be commercially ruinous on paper. Very few authors understood print in a way that Blake—a printmaker—did, and yet to read his variant copies in anything approaching the evolving formats in which they were published during his lifetime has proved impossible for generations of publishers to produce. As such, although Blake may be synonymous with print through his craft, if ever there was an author who demanded the reproducibility of digital media, it is Blake.

7. There is nothing new in this assertion. The editors of the Blake Archive came to this very conclusion in the 1990s, enabling a new generation of Blake scholars to have some chance of understanding the corpus completely. What it does mean, however, is that we must examine more closely than ever the methods by which his works are distributed, and in many ways the advent of new platforms for reading and dissemination are an excellent opportunity for this. Although there are plenty of scholars who have returned attention to the economics and technology of the book, too often these have become invisible to us through familiarity: as such,

the current disruption of the book publishing industry that we are experiencing provides an excellent opportunity to consider once more how we engage with Blake in the classroom. The fallibility of the publishing industry meant that for more than a century of reproduction following the appearance of Alexander Gilchrist's biography of Blake in 1863, editors could not place before the vast majority of readers anything like Blake's complete corpus of individual copies before the advent of the Blake Archive. Yet if I do not intend to praise print in and of itself, nor do I intend to bury it in the classroom. Two of my most treasured possessions remain a very battered copy of David Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1965), annotations penciled across its yellowing leaves, and the hardback facsimiles of the illuminated books produced by the William Blake Trust and the Tate in the 1990s, both of which regularly make their way into my teaching sessions. The flaws in Erdman's edition of Blake were commented upon widely following publication of the revised edition, most notably by the Santa Cruz Blake Study Group (1984), and yet as Andrew Welch observes, this remarkable, flawed text remains the academic standard when referring to Blake because facsimiles are frequently almost illegible and because it serves as a common reference point amidst the potential confusion of multiple copies (2010). Furthermore, when we abandon some analogue forms such as the printed book, we also lose a series of sensory inputs that digital technologies find it hard to replicate in their current forms, as Chris Harrison pointed out recently when comparing the "rich touch" interface of something like a guitar to the more limited screen of a smartphone or tablet (as cited by Leswing, 2014). This is more than mere nostalgia for the yellowing paper of my copy of Erdman: turning pages and scribbling annotations can be an important part of the physical act of studying that, as Pam Mueller and Daniel Oppenheimer argue (2014), is more effective for retaining information in memory.

8. Mueller and Oppenheimer's research deals more with note taking than actual reading, but it is important here as a warning to avoid the all-too-common rush in some quarters to assume that digital is automatically superior to print, against those such as Sven Birkerts, who lamented the loss of the printed book. Some uses are better served by print, while others (e.g., the ability to search through large amounts of data in ever more convenient devices; the ability to compare multiple copies of a particular work) are more easily done via digital devices. Yet the experience of relying on e-readers remains, when teaching Blake, a messy one, not least because the attempt to read (and teach) Blake in print remains chaotic. Attempts to create standard editions, which have their origins in attempts to recover authoritative biblical translations by scholars such as Johann Bengel and Johann Griesbach in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are complex enough when the primary sources are printed more conventionally. Occasionally, controversies can spill into the public domain, particularly when an editor uses unpublished manuscripts to produce copy-texts, scandalously so in the case of Walter Gabler's new version of *Ulysses* (1922) in 1984. Gabler (and others) were responding to the well-understood fact that James Joyce's novel had repeatedly been printed with numerous errors since 1922, but as Charles Rossman discovered, the final edition was as much about the conflicts of money, copyright law, and critical ideology as the pursuit of a pure ur-text (Brannon 70-74). In the classroom, the ideal aspiration should always be to direct students towards an edition of an author's works that presents the original text in a form that is also convenient to use: add in a technological innovation such as Blake's use of illuminated printing, however, and that process becomes much more complicated. If scholars previously had difficulties deciding what the authoritative text of *Ulysses* should look like, imagine the manifold difficulties of a teacher who should really also decide what copy of one of Blake's illuminated books should be presented to the classroom. The printed book was meant to be a solution to a problem, standardizing the delivery of text to multiple readers distributed widely across space and time. For his own radical purposes, Blake thumbed his nose at the conventions of publishing, refusing something as simple as a fixed, authoritative book from which teachers could transmit priestly knowledge. In *The Four Zoas* (comp. ca. 1796-1797), Blake describes Urizen as transcribing the world as a series of iron laws, suitably recorded in an enduring format:

Writing in bitter tears & groans in books of iron & brass

The enormous wonders of the Abysses once his brightest joy[.] (Erdman 347)

Urizen's books are fixed, final records, and his brain is one of eternal print, a mockery of Blake's own fluid and experimental approach to the technology of publishing.

9. For Richard Nash, the tendency—and temptation—to defend publishing and the printed book via an exceptionalist stance is one that undermines the book because it sees it as a frail entity threatened by technology. By contrast, he argues, “[t]he book is not counter-technology, it is technology, it is the apotheosis of technology—just like the wheel or the chair” before concluding:

Book culture is in far less peril than many choose to assume, for the notion of an imperiled book culture assumes that book culture is a beast far more refined, rarified, and fragile than it actually is. (Nash 2013)

The disruptive power of book culture has long been evident, and its ability to transform education is not something that was restricted to previous times: the book is not a bulwark *against* but an agent of change. Ted Striphas points out that the unsettled and unsettling effects of books are nothing new to the current age and that they are always “both in and out of sync with the present—whenever the present may be” (x). Nash’s call for book culture to lead the charge rather than man the barricades against the barbarians does not dismiss the traditions of book publishing that have their roots in the eighteenth century. Editors, for example, will clearly have a role to play in making writing better and producing books; but as curators of what should be placed in front of the public, Nash believes that their abilities to pick the right book is nonsense, a combination of money and luck. Rather, their real skills are relational, connecting authors with designers, publishers, markets, and, ultimately, audiences. While the marketplaces of Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Apple may have lowered many of the barriers to entry, simply launching a title into the world and hoping it will connect (as Blake, bitterly, knew far too well) is far from a guarantee of success. Publishing, as Nash observes, is developing into areas such as bespoke bureau services, conferences and consultation, and educational activities such as the Faber Academy. In such a world, the brand and reputation of editors and publishers, rather than an intrinsic value of the content of “art,” remains as important as ever: “the business of literature is the business of making culture, not just the business of manufacturing bound books” (Nash).

10. In many respects, this essay is broadly in agreement with Nash, especially with regard to literature as a business, which is probably in more robust shape than many undoubtedly suffering from the current disruption of print would care to admit. As Striphas observes, the book trade has been on the “brink” of collapse since the 1930s at least (45). Nonetheless, this suffering is real, and Nash’s underlying faith in the free market should be viewed skeptically. John B. Thompson’s *Merchants of Culture* (2012) offers an insight into some of the major trends affecting the current book trade, most notably the “winner takes more” model of publishing, which does not have its origin in the transition to digital but is instead an outcome of publishing conglomerations and mergers that began in the 1980s (189-191). It was the demands of the so-called “Big Six” in the publishing world, as well as large-scale retailers such as Borders and Barnes and Noble, that led to a deterioration of a mythical golden age of publishing—one where authors and editors could build upon profound relationships without the necessary imperative of turning a fast—and large—buck. Indeed, the fears of monopolization of book culture that Amazon is currently felt to represent—quite rightly in many cases—follow ironically from the many successes of Random House, Penguin, Hachette, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins, and Macmillan throughout the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, Laura Miller is right to have called booksellers “reluctant capitalists,” although the scenario she described in the 1990s is increasingly looking like ancient history—one where acquisitions by companies such as Barnes and Noble and HMV (which bought out Waterstones in 1998) established precedents for Amazon to become the largest retailer in the world.

11. The example of HMV is an illustrative one: established as a retail outlet for the Gramophone Company in London in 1921, by the early-twenty-first century it had become a major retailer for DVDs, consumer electronics, video games, and magazines—as well as books. HMV was anything but a reluctant capitalist, seeing books as a valuable part of its entertainment business. However, with the rise of e-commerce it found itself unable to compete with online retailers and with Amazon in particular. When setting up Amazon, Jeff Bezos famously drew up a

list of twenty potential products he might sell—including CDs and software as well as books—before settling on the latter as offering the widest selection of inventory with which no bricks and mortar store could compete (Brandt 53-65). From this point, the company would expand into new products to such an extent that it would eventually dwarf even giants such as Walmart and become what Brad Stone has called “the everything store” (2013). One of the significant factors in the rise of Amazon has been the complete transition from book retailers being reluctant capitalists to the darling of Wall Street, with Bezos bringing the frequently aggressive techniques of large-scale retail to an industry that has generally managed to maintain at least a veneer of genteel capitalism alongside ongoing commodification. More significantly, its investment in e-books has been the driving force in a much bigger transformation of the business of literature.

12. The e-book was not invented by Amazon, but until the launch of the Kindle in 2007, it would be fair to say that it was a minority concern for publishers. In the late eighties and early nineties, companies such as Eastgate Systems, Digital Book, Inc., and Sony were working on delivering books via formats such as floppy disk and CD-ROM, all of which were easily surpassed as media for distributing text by the growth of the web. As a way of initially transmitting text and then other multimedia content, the web quickly surpassed other formats, not least because of its public and open protocols and formatting language. Unlike early e-book formats, HTML and HTTP were non-proprietary, and the variety of devices upon which web texts could be displayed meant that services such as Project Gutenberg (which predated the web by some twenty years) could be more widely distributed than ever before. The emphasis at this point tended to be on texts rather than books. It is not especially surprising that, during the nineties, the theoretical emphasis of much writing about the web—for example George Landow and Paul Delany’s *Hypermedia and Literary Studies* (1994) or Landow’s *Hypertext 2.0* (1997)—concentrated more on texts than books, as much a condition of the response to the poststructuralism that dominated much critical theory at the time. Those writers who did focus on the book, such as Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (2006), tended to lament its downfall, and so the stage seemed to be set for a contrast and conflict between books and technology.

13. What this neglected, of course, was the fact that books are and have always been technology. Poststructural discussions of hypertext were not the only critical framework for how ways of reading could be considered even in the nineties, although works such as Roger Chartier’s *The Order of Books* (translated in 1994) and Leila Avrin’s *Scribes, Scripts and Books* (1991) seemed to operate within a non-overlapping magisterium when compared to the glamour exercised by the web. Yet even at this early stage there was a recognition by what theorists such as David Greetham (*Theories* 27-63) referred to as the ontology of texts, that the physical medium affected the relation between readers and what they read. As Chartier observed, readers “never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality” (50), and while the discussion of the ontology of hypertext was rarely discussed, Birkert’s insistence that the web would never replace books (a position substantially ceded in the preface to the second edition of his own book) semi-consciously echoed the difficulty caused by the material reality of reading on a screen when that screen was attached to a desktop computer or, at best, a laptop. The experience of absorbing an eighteenth-century triple-decker or an epic poem while scrolling through long screeds of text was a daunting one for even the most dedicated reader, and to pretend otherwise was to ignore the convenience and efficiency that the format of print offered, particularly as cheap, easily-transported paperbacks. The technology of the web, while more immediate in many ways than the technology of print, was much less amenable to certain types of reading than being able to open a book at any time and in any location without waiting for a cumbersome computer to boot up.

14. As such, the single most important innovation in the development and acceptance of e-books has been the object which people use to read them. Such objects, of course, are more complex than the plastic, metal, and glass of which they are made. Innovations in terms of software (first of all Adobe’s PDF format, followed by others such as EPUB and mobipocket, a proprietary variant of which Amazon uses for its own e-books), display technologies such as e-ink and Retina displays, and battery life have all contributed to the possibilities of e-readers. In addition, the business of electronic literature also depends on a commercial environment, the digital or media ecosystems that will fund that innovation. It was David Clark, a computer

scientist at MIT, who first coined the phrase the “post PC internet” in a talk delivered in 1999 to describe the future of computing as “inevitably heterogeneous” (as cited by Lohr, 1999), but the term was popularized by Steve Jobs in 2007 at the time of the launch of the iPhone. In an interview with Bill Gates at the fifth “All Things Digital” conference, he very clearly saw (in a way that Gates equally as clearly did not) that consumers were beginning to focus on the function of devices rather than the devices themselves (Gates and Jobs 2007). With the release of the Kindle in 2007 and the iPad in 2010, such objects could finally approach the status of books in the sphere of reading—one in which readers tend not to view them as the technological marvels they are but instead focus on the content that they deliver. Of course, we are still very far from that stage at present: tablets are still (just) too novel to be perceived as anything *but* technology. Yet as consumer devices—whether for web pages, apps, movies, games, or books—it is also clear that their ubiquity means that we are moving into a post-PC era that is as significant for our computer-using habits as the invention of the desktop PC itself in the seventies or the adoption of the web in the nineties.

15. With that observation in mind, a cautionary note will be useful: Greetham has warned that the experience of editing electronic texts can be as much a totalitarian one as something which is phenomenologically fluid, observing that, contrary to the exhortations of what he calls “pomo romanticists and liberation technologists” (“Function of [Textual] Criticism” 40), the shift from orality to literacy was much more significant than that from print to electronic media. Furthermore, he suggests that it was the transition from roll to codex that effected a non-hierarchical, nonlinear understanding of textuality. Such an observation is also helpful in terms of what scholars such as Lars Sauerberg and Thomas Pettitt have called the “Gutenberg parenthesis”—the five hundred years or so of literate, print-based culture that is bracketed by the oral culture of the spoken word and the new oral culture of electronic and broadcast media. Pettitt’s provocative statement that the history of media has been “interrupted by print” and Sauerberg’s insistence that the new oral culture moves from “a metaphysics of linearity and reflection to a-linearity and co-production of ‘reality’” (79) are useful in drawing attention to certain cognitive factors introduced by different media objects, but the distinction is too neat: as any reader of Blake’s prophetic works will know, a-linearity can easily be a feature of print as well as oral cultures.

16. The long history of print publishing after Blake’s death rarely served him well, particularly in the context of a rapidly expanding sphere of higher education in the second half of the twentieth century. It took a century for an authoritative collection of Blake’s poetry and prose to be published in Geoffrey Keynes’s Nonesuch edition of 1927, which separated text and image in the format that publishers could more easily distribute. The various Trianon Press facsimiles are beautiful objects in their own right, but they are too rare and expensive for everyday teaching, and prior to the appearance of the Blake Archive, that tended to mean a reliance on the much cheaper Oxford University Press paperbacks that were restricted to *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience* (1794) and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790). The Blake Archive transformed accessibility to the original illuminated books and yet raises its own frustrations when it comes actually to reading Blake in class, which is why I still often sit in the classroom with a Kindle as well as a computer projector displaying the Blake Archive. Recent improvements to the Blake Archive mean that it does display now on tablets such as the iPad (which was previously not the case because of a reliance on Java which, along with Flash, was not supported by iOS), but trying to read the frame-based version of Erdman remains a less-than-pleasurable experience on such devices. Having committed to the Kindle—more from the folly of being a passive consumer who enjoyed having a library of several hundred works on one light, plastic object—I can easily access Alicia Ostriker’s Penguin edition of Blake’s works. However, the Erdman edition is not currently available, and illustrated versions such as that by Lexicos Publishing are of poor quality. The situation is slightly better on iBooks, where an edition by e-Art now offers more or less readable facsimiles of plates but with an almost complete absence of professional editing that makes it dangerous to recommend to students. Faber and Touch Press demonstrated as far back as 2011 just what the iPad, in particular, was capable of when they released an extremely impressive version of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) as an app, combining audio readings, interviews, and filmed performances alongside a carefully prepared edition of the text. I have used the iOS app regularly for the past three years in one course that I teach, and it deserves

much of the critical praise it has earned, drawing attention to the lamentable lack of anything comparable for studying Blake.

17. Rather than conclude with a simple plea to publishers to create something similar for Blake's works, however, this essay will return to the problem of ecosystems, as they are currently conceived by the Big Four technology companies. Rather than being a flat system that would allow us to understand our connection to the mineral object of the book in our hands, the ecosystems of Amazon, Google, and Apple, in particular, are highly vertical systems designed to lock consumers into a particular product and operating system. It should never be forgotten that the technology of the printed book has its own barriers to access, not least of which are literacy and access to books, but at least most of us can borrow a copy from the local library (assuming it hasn't been closed down, as is currently happening in many smaller locations in the UK). To read the Faber and Touch Press edition of *The Waste Land* requires an iPad. This represents the current commercial landscape whereby Amazon, Google, and Apple in particular attempt to monopolize a wide range of activities and data—which include the classroom. This is not a nostalgic glance backwards to a golden age of publishing: as is clear from the introduction, my argument is concerned with the business of literature that also exercised Blake during his lifetime. However, the mechanisms of distribution and production that emerged over three centuries—while flawed in many ways (there is, after all, a reason why the phrase “rare books” flows so easily from the tongue)—did not hardwire technological restrictions into reading in a way that Google Play, Apple iTunes, and the Amazon store so frequently do. While I have argued that the printed book does not automatically deserve a privileged position because of its ontological status over digital formats, economically it worries me that we are witnessing a possible balkanization of cultural formats into different platforms, for example in the recent spat between Amazon and Hachette. Suzanne Tamang and Gregory Donovan cite Evgeny Morozov's phrase “openwashing” to refer to reading “openness into situations and environments where it doesn't exist” (2014), but a more immediate threat of “openwashing” could be the removal of relatively open systems with monopolistic platforms. One of the great virtues of the use of the book in class has been the sheer convenience of referring to the set text; to use a well-worn cliché, it can be very much simpler (at least to teach) when we are all reading from the same page. If we cannot be sure that everyone can access the text we want to use and if readers are excluded from discovering new vistas from being locked out of print, our task as educators will become that much harder. Book culture—and its role in the classroom—is far from fragile once we recognize just how varied its forms are. What it should never become, however, is a privilege for the few, rolling back the gains that relatively true openness in digital communications have established over the past two decades in the pursuit of short-term profit.

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Notes

[1] All parenthetical page citations for William Blake quotes refer to David Erdman's edition of The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake (1988). [BACK](#)

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General Editors: Neil Fraistat and Steven E. Jones

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